

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 24, 2009
Ascension Sunday
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 110:1-5
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:49-53

Are you one of those people who do not like “good byes”? Saying good bye can sometimes be a difficult and emotion-laden thing to do. Go to an airport and sit in an obscure chair and observe for a few minutes, and you’ll know what I mean.

Or watch persons from the armed forces as they prepare to board a ship and leave their families behind.

Saying good bye is not easy.

Do you remember the first time you left home and said good bye to your parents? Perhaps when you embarked for college, or were ready to be married, or were entering the service of your country.

And those of you who are parents, do you remember saying good bye to your children when they left the nest to begin college or career or a new life somewhere else?

Saying good bye is not easy. But we should remember that in all of these situations, saying good bye can also be like saying hello. That is, the closing of one chapter in our lives makes possible the beginning of another chapter. Through

the sadness and bittersweet taste of good byes, relationships have a chance to grow and change and evolve to another level. In a sense, those relationships become something new by ceasing to be what they were before.

To gain by losing. To hold fast by letting go. To become something new by ceasing to be what we were before. These truths are at the heart of the Gospel. And perhaps nowhere is this more true than in the story of Christ's ascension.

Jesus spoke often to his disciples about the fact that he would leave them. But they treasured his presence so much that they couldn't imagine his departure. This final "good bye", then, was one of the most difficult lessons they learned. For when he left them, he would never again be with them in the same, recognizable way.

But Jesus' "good bye" to the disciples -- bittersweet though it was -- was in a sense also a saying "hello," for this special relationship they enjoyed took on a new character and shape.

On the one hand, the disciples had to say good bye to the Christ who was *before* them and *beside* them. And it's very hard for us to comprehend how difficult this must have been. They have rubbed shoulders with the divine, with the very Son of God. They have seen him do amazing things right before their very eyes. They have walked with him, and talked with him, and known him in a way we could never imagine.

No doubt saying good bye to Jesus was hard. And maybe this is why much of the New Testament is preoccupied with looking for Jesus' imminent return once he ascended. After all, when you've spent so much time with Jesus *before* you and *beside* you, it's natural to want him back before you and beside you after he is gone.

But saying good bye to the Christ who was *before* them and *beside* them made it possible for the disciples to say hello to the Christ who was to come to dwell *within* them through the power of the Spirit filling the Church. And in time, it dawned on the disciples that the divine presence for which they were waiting was already with them. They had inherited Christ's mission, and with his ascension to glory his power was now with them. Saying good bye had made possible a new "hello."

Good byes are bittersweet for us also, which is why the Ascension story is something we should ponder often. Our lives are full of "letting go's" and "beginning agains." Nowhere is this more true than when we lose a loved one. When we lose someone we love, there is an emptiness in our hearts.

So God sends his Holy Spirit, and we cling to the Church. God comforts us for present and past pain, and channels our sorrow into sincere prayers and gracious acts. He gives us grace so that even these painful good-byes can be preparation for joyous "hellos" which will come in their appointed time.

Yes, saying good-bye can be difficult and bittersweet. But what is it, really, to say “good bye”?

Centuries ago, English-speaking Christians parted by saying, “God be with ye.” In time, it became “God be w’ ye,” and then finally “Good-bye.”

Jesus’ ascension fills the phrase “good bye” with the full power of its meaning. In his ascension, “Good bye” truly means “God be with you.” It means that God *is with us*.

One day, perhaps sooner than we imagine, this same Jesus who said good bye and rose into the clouds will return on the clouds with great glory. In that moment, every loss will be turned to gain, every rough place will be made smooth, every tear will be wiped dry, and justice will be done in all the earth.

In the meantime, let us resolve to be witnesses to his love and power. Let us throw our lot in with the people of God, the Church, and continue to explore this relationship which was made possible through the saying of a painful good-bye. And as we do, let us always remember our Lord’s words to his disciples: “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.